

# **SEEING DIVERSITY, MULTIPLYING POSSIBILITY: My journey from post-feminism to postdevelopment with JK Gibson-Graham**

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In W. Harcourt (ed) *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*. 2016. Palgrave.

## **Introduction**

As a graduate student I first came into contact with the work and persons of JK Gibson-Graham. As I was mentored and supervised by Katherine Gibson, the piece 'Building Community Economies: Women and the Politics of Place' became part of my journey into feminism and feminist postdevelopment research. In this chapter, I highlight three principles I have carried with me from that time until now: starting where you are, seeing diversity, and multiplying possibility. With reference to my own developing research interests, I show how Gibson-Graham's work is relevant and inspiring in a third wave feminist context.

## **Starting Where You Are**

*If women are everywhere, a woman is always somewhere, and those somewheres are what the project is about: places being created, strengthened, defended, augmented, transformed by women* (Gibson-Graham, 2005: 131).

Because the personal is political, I begin here with my own feminist journey, a journey in which the work of Gibson-Graham has played an important role. My feminist journey began rather late, I see now. For most of my youth in the 'somewhere' of 1980s rural New Zealand I assumed what I now know is called a 'post-feminist' stance. That is, I assumed that gender equality had been achieved and all I had to do was get out there and grasp it. Looking back, my attitude seems almost misogynist: I saw equality as something to be achieved by becoming something like a man, and I identified with the male protagonists in all the fiction classics we read throughout school. I eschewed anything overly feminine, had mostly male friends, and began down the male-dominated career path of engineering with a hearty side helping of male-dominated kayaking water sports. Fortunately, a number of experiences arrested this odd trajectory, and gradually I came to understand what the feminist project was all about.

The first experience was getting engaged and married at the rather tender age of twenty, to my husband who was then unemployed. All of a sudden, expectations of appropriate wifely behaviour somehow forced themselves into my consciousness, primarily becoming visible due to my unorthodox role as family breadwinner. As I came up against institutional and social expectations that cast me in the role of economic dependant, my identity as protagonist of my own story was challenged for the first time. The second experience was that of conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my development studies Masters degree in a national park in Sichuan Province, China. After

three days in a Tibetan village, I managed discussions with almost all the men, but had yet to talk to a woman for more than three minutes. My breakfast appeared as if by magic every morning, and then the women trudged down the mountain to catch the bus to their tourism work, returning late in the afternoon only to busy themselves in the kitchen and the courtyard with food preparation and washing. Eventually, I began working with them in their jobs outside the village and was able to get more of an insight into their lives. The insight I was left with from this experience was that in the face of hardship and sudden change, women are collectively strong, resourceful and adaptable while not losing their ability to care. Coming from the background I have already outlined, I actually felt guilty for having these 'sexist' thoughts about women's strengths and men's failures. But I saw for the first time that gender equality should not mean women becoming more like men.

The third experience is the key here, however. In March 2006, I arrived as a new PhD student at the Australian National University to study with Katherine Gibson. In addition to the normal stresses of international moves, graduate study and fieldwork planning in China, I was also heavily pregnant and my husband and I were both dependent on *my* PhD scholarship for our income. Despite our avowals that we would share parenting equally and give equal priorities to both our study programmes, I began to understand how my embodiment as a mother could potentially change this dynamic permanently. Still feeling guilty for my 'sexist' thoughts, I tackled the list of feminist geography articles that Katherine had assigned me, hoping to find some answer to my turmoil. It was at this time that Katherine handed me her volume of *Women and the Politics of Place*, and pointed out her chapter within as a useful 'starting point' for thinking about researching women in China. She probably did not realise that she had also just handed me the key to thinking about my own journey as a woman and a mother.

By the time my daughter was born, it was clear to me that there were some pretty big differences between men and women, and it was not a bad thing necessarily. As I worked with my body to birth and breastfeed my baby, I experienced a deep embodied connection to my child somewhat different from my husband. I knew when to feed her because I could feel it was time as the milk came in; he had to watch the clock, think about her signals and proceed through trial and error. Yet as family breadwinner in a capitalist society, I also felt pressure to dissociate myself from this somehow and get out there and work 'proper' hours. During this time of turmoil, as these new experiences and thoughts and pressures whirled in my mind, often while breastfeeding in the middle of the night, I read:

Women are associated with place not because they are home-based or place bound but because of their inaugural and continuing role in shaping new politics. Over the course of more than three decades feminists have inserted issues of the female person and body – the place "closest in" – into political discourse and struggles in their domestic settings, in their communities, and in the national and international political arenas, thereby enlarging the domain of the "political" ...feminists have not fixated on the global as the ultimate scale of successful activism... they are continuing their orientation to the local, the daily, the bodily, recognising that transforming the world involves transforming sites, subjects, and practices worldwide (Gibson-Graham, 2005: 131).

My new orientation to the female, the daily, the bodily and the place closest in was thus affirmed as important politically and intellectually. As I began to prepare my fieldwork proposal and trip to

northwest China, I could not help but wonder how the local, the daily, the bodily looked to mothers in Qinghai, and what transformations were happening in their sites, subjectivities and practices. How did they manage an embodied connection to their child, if this indeed was something they experienced at all? How did they contribute to their household financially and economically after children were born? How were their lives being affected by processes of globalisation, development and the rapid changes occurring in China? How was the political present in their everyday lives, and how did that compare to mine? Clearly, for me to remain interested in my studies and to work through my own struggles in becoming a strong *female* protagonist of my own story, these questions needed to become part of my project of research. The next chapter for this female protagonist was the move to the city of Xining, Qinghai's provincial capital, my daughter then just eight months old.

Women are everywhere and therefore always somewhere. As Gibson-Graham note, it is these somewheres that are being transformed, but I think it is also that these somewheres may transform a woman. The somewhere for this woman's story became Xining, Qinghai Province, China. I lived on Ba Yi Road, in the lower-income side of the city, lined with small family businesses, open air markets, hawkers, street cleaners and more. Other mothers were very obviously present in the economic activities of my street, and in later interviews they expressed a strong conviction that they work to provide for their children and parents. The types of economic activities they were involved in are considered the least important by traditional economists (Waring 1999) and Chinese provincial governments (Hsu, 2007), perhaps because they are activities that meet the flexible employment needs of women with children. Whatever the case, the somewhere for these mothers' stories was Ba Yi Road in Xining too, and it was this somewhere where our stories would intertwine momentarily as we all sought to provide for and nurture ourselves and our families.

## Seeing Diversity

One of the inspirations for the WPP project has been the desire to assert a logic of difference and possibility against the homogenizing tendencies of globalization and the teleological generalities of political economy (Gibson-Graham, 2005: 132).

Situated in the far west of China, in the province of Qinghai, the 1000 year old city of Xining stretches along a river valley between two ranges of dusty and bare mountains. Some one million residents of Han, Tibetan, Hui and other ethnicities live out all or part of their lives here, some migrating seasonally between rural and urban homes. The city is the headquarters for projects, run by both government and development agencies, that seek to 'open up' the west, 'build up' the west, and modernise the city and its people once and for all. No-one is the ethnic majority here: Han, Tibetan and Hui Muslim each make up around a scant third of the city, with some other minority cultures thrown into the mix. Yet Han Chinese culture is the majority culture nationally, and is seen as the culture of 'modernity', in this part of the world (as opposed to the 'feudal' minorities). And so it is that modernity and backwardness are measured along a line where Han Chinese norms (cultural, economic, social, political) are seen as the most advanced, and the other ethnic groups are lined up in order of their quality and modernity. Development is often imagined as this: an out-of-the-way, backward, minority-populated place coming to look more like the modern cities of the eastern seaboard, physically and culturally.

Just as the cultural diversity of Xining and Qinghai comes to be imagined by many to line up in a teleological queue, from backward to modern, so too does the practices, lives and 'quality'<sup>i</sup> of mothers there. My research took place in 2007 and 2009, and was largely comprised of ethnographic observation (for most of a year in 2007) and qualitative recorded interviews in Mandarin Chinese (for three months in 2009) with Han, migrant Han, Hui, and Tibetan mothers. My criteria for inclusion was that they identified as a mother, of course among other subjectivities they held simultaneously. While grandparents often have primary responsibility to care for children, only one of my interviewed participants was a grandmother as I gradually came to focus on the particularities of younger mothers' lives rather than the care of children.<sup>ii</sup> The majority of my remaining 21 interviewees had children under 6.

Although my focus on mothers was a result of my own life-changing experience of becoming a mother, I tried to approach each of these women with a 'beginner's mind', looking for the diverse ways in which they managed life as mothers and not assuming contiguity with my own experiences or others I had observed and interviewed. Some of the mothers lived away from their children, some lived with their in-laws, some with their parents, some with their nuclear family. Others oscillated between different arrangements depending on the time of life or economic circumstances of the extended family. Some had their children with them at work, or even lived in shops with their children and other family members. My ethnographic work was fairly wide-ranging, but my qualitative interviews with mothers focused on their roles and responsibilities in the household and wider family and their experiences in a number of key mothering activities that emerged: providing, birthing, breastfeeding, and infant toileting and hygiene.

Whatever their background and current circumstances, I was consistently struck by the way in which women 'lined up' their mothering practices and those of others they knew into two camps: modern and backward. Just as the city of Xining is understood by residents and outsiders to lie at a specific point along a continuum from 'backward' to 'modern', and to be propelled along this path by the process of 'development', so too are mothers understood to line up in some way. Qinghai is one of China's poorest provinces on the most common economic indicators (Goodman, 2004). I was interviewing mothers with reference to their everyday lives, and in my 'beginner's mind' their mothering practices were not necessarily related to their poverty or wealth. Yet for mothers in Xining, it seemed that the 'economic' criteria of modernity and backwardness shaped attitudes to everything else mothering.

Figure 1 is constructed from words and ideas found in transcripts and fieldnotes, and it shows a simplistic 'lining up' of women into two categories, backward and modern. Although economics is given as the primary difference between 'backward' and 'modern' cities or provinces, *everything* the poor women did as mothers was assumed to also be inferior somehow to what the 'modern' women did. The economic, birthing, breastfeeding and hygiene practices of mothers from economically 'backward' areas or ethnic groups were *all* seen as retrograde and inferior irrespective of her education level or income. Figure 2 illustrates this, where the first column describes the words used and attitudes towards rural, migrant, ethnic minority and poor mothers (that is, those considered 'less modern') and the second column describes the words used and attitudes towards mothers who were wealthy Han, Asian or European immigrants from outside the province, and the very wealthy Han within.

**Figure 1: The 'Lining Up' of Women in Northwest China**

Poor	Wealthy
Selfless	'Cultured'
Undeveloped	Developed
'Feudal'	'changing for the better'
<b>Backward</b>	<b>Modern</b>
Restrictive	'options'
Ignorant	Educated
'Hasn't changed'	'decisionmaking'
'Uncultured'	Rational
Dirty	Attentive
'Bitter'	Hygienic
'Low status'	'Higher status'
'Superstitious'	Equality

*Source: Fieldnotes and Interview Transcriptions 2007-2009*

**Figure 2: The Lining Up of Mothering Practices in Northwest China**

Dirty /unhygienic practices	Ultrahygienic
Prefer boys	Selective <i>yuezi</i>
Mother-in-law childcare/babies at work	Read books about childrearing
Spoiling	Modern products
Unable to educate children	Imported products
'jig' babies to sleep	Put babies down to sleep
<b>Backward</b>	<b>Modern</b>
Traditional weaning methods	Pregnant woman health products
Overdress children	Lactating woman health products
Traditional nappyfree toileting	Toys and books
Breastfeed too long and too often	Best education from Kindergarten
Poor quality milk or untreated milk	<i>Baomu</i> /nanny childcare
<i>Yuezi</i> superstitions	Foetal education
Daughter-in-law in extended family	Nuclear family

*Source: Fieldnotes and Interview Transcriptions 2007-2009*

It became clear that one effect of the development discourse in Northwest China is that the diversity of mothering practices is forced into a kind of historical queue teleology, such as that described by Doreen Massey:

And if you point to differences around the globe, Mozambique or Mali or Nicaragua, they will tell you such countries are just 'behind'; that eventually they will follow the path along which the capitalist West has led... (Massey 2005: 5)

In this teleological understanding of difference, mother difference is somehow linked with modernisation. Even if some of the practices of mothering in the 'backward' column are recommended by the most up-to-date psychological research in the Western World, it appears that the fact they are the traditions of a supposedly 'backward' community is enough for them to be dismissed. How then, might I represent mothers' activities differently? In Figure 3, I use a wordle to illustrate the mess and mesh of mothering practices in culture, where certain themes come through (the size of the word represents the frequency of use), but are released from lining up with the

terms 'backward' and 'modern'.<sup>iii</sup> This is one way of re-representing the lining up figures, and it works to 'assert a logic of difference and possibility' rather than a teleological story of mothering and modernity. In the wordle representation, all mothering practices are contemporaneously present and are not subject to the state of Qinghai's economy or modernity.

Another way to represent mothers activities differently is to use the diverse economies framework Gibson-Graham introduce in their work (2005), mapping the diversity of economic activities mothers are involved in. In the diverse economy framework, all kinds of economic practices are mapped out as present in their own right, not in relation to capitalism (2005 PAGE). In the same way, applying such an approach to mothering in Qinghai allowed me to see the diversity of all the different kinds of coexisting practices, without organising them into a historical queue where X practice is slated to replace Y. This does not mean that all practices are ideal, are beneficial to women, or beneficial to children either. But it delinks mothering practices from a capitalist logic where the economic status of a place, group, community or individual determines the quality of mothering or parenting. It does not follow that the poor mothers are necessarily poor mothers, even if they have lower incomes and less education. It does not follow that the mothering practices of the rich or middle class or majority ethnicity are necessarily best, even if it is generally understood to be so in a particular cultural context.

In Figure 4, I give an example of the diversity of economic activities mothers perform on Bayi Road. While not all the mothering practices present in the wordle can be represented here, it highlights how many mothering practices are also part of the (diverse) economy that sustains life for individuals, families and communities. Rather than positioning some kinds of economic (or mothering) activity as further along an imaginary historical queue than others, the diverse economies framework allowed me to represent mothers' economic activities as contemporaneous and equally important, if not equally desirable.

What are the effects of seeing and representing this diversity? Clearly, as Gibson-Graham point out in their use of the diverse economies framework, not all activities may be ethically or personally desirable. A mother may preferred to be paid for her housework labour, or to not have to perform it all, for example (and indeed some mothers here did not). But the point is not to celebrate diversity per se, but to open up possibility. For it is in seeing the diversity of women's lives and their important economic contributions that we might imagine a number of different futures outside those prescribed by the teleological story of mothering and modernity. In the next section I pick out two noncapitalist activities from this diverse economy: the noncapitalist transaction of breastfeeding and the noncapitalist labour of infant toileting. I explore the exigencies and possibilities of mother's everyday lives in Xining through these two activities.

Figure 3: Mothering practices in Northwest China

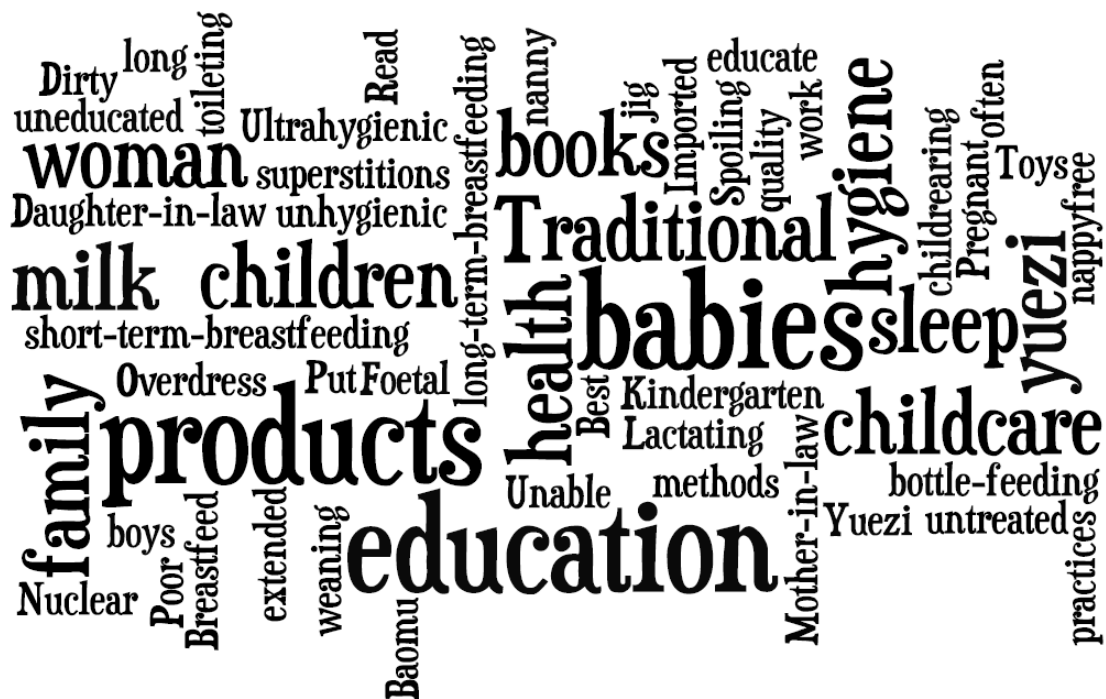


Figure 4: The Diverse Economy of Mothers on Bayi Road

TRANSACTIONS	LABOUR	ENTERPRISE
<b>Market</b> Consumer of market goods, including babycare services and products Paying for birth-related services such as scans, c-sections, doctor's fees	<b>Wage</b> Informal waged workers	<b>Capitalist</b> Co-owners of teahouse uptown
<b>Alternative Market</b> Informal market Purchase of fruit, vegetables, and meat from 'back of the truck' street stalls Hiring of poor relatives or friends for below market wages Black market Currency exchange on black market	<b>Alternative Paid</b> Self-employed Small one-woman stalls Back of the bike businesses In-kind Housing provided in boss-relative's home or shop Goods given as part of payment	<b>Alternative Capitalist</b> Family-owned enterprise Noodle house owned by two sister-in-laws who employ much of their extended family
<b>Nonmarket</b> Household flows Sharing household labour with other family members Breastfeeding children Gift-giving Giving gifts to friends, colleagues and family, sometimes to cultivate guanxi. State allocations Space for marketplace, toilets provided State appropriations Family land in the country appropriated by state for mining Barter Between stall-holders and suppliers	<b>Unpaid</b> Housework Cooking, cleaning, washing clothes for household Family care Of children and elderly relatives Infant toileting Self-provisioning labour Preserving Volunteer At church, mosque and temple Care of others' children Giving birth Breastfeeding	<b>Non-capitalist</b> Independent Back of the bike business Stallholders in marketplace Butcher-mothers Feudal/Patriarchal: Many families operate as an economic unit, with obligatory childcare roles for husband's mother. Family members may be expected to contribute to family or patriarch-owned businesses for free.



## Multiplying Possibility

[The language of] place signifies the possibility of understanding local economies as *places* with highly specific economic identities and capacities rather than simply as *nodes* in a global capitalist system. In more broadly philosophical terms, place is that which is not fully yoked into a system of meaning, not entirely subsumed to a (global) order; it is that aspect of every site that exists as potentiality (Gibson-Graham, 2005:132).

Although Qinghai is a somewhat 'out of the way' part of China, it is not isolated from global changes by any means. Two technologies that have the potential to change the everyday lives of mothers are infant formula milk and disposable nappies. But if we reject the teleological understanding of mothering diversity, we cannot assume that they will be taken up merely because they are available and are 'modern'. In fact, infant formula has been widely taken up but disposable nappies less so, and for a set of entirely different contingent reasons different from what one might expect. When we think of local economies as places rather than nodes in the capitalist system, we are more open to considering other possibilities where place is not entirely subsumed into the global order (Gibson-Graham, 2005). In the next section I briefly explore the examples of breastfeeding and *baniao*, two mothering practices where change is occurring somewhat contingently.

### Unhomogenising Milk

In Qinghai and China more generally, one mothering practice that has changed in the last twenty years is the practice of breastfeeding (Gu *et al.* 2012). The use of formula milk has become widespread, and even with recent increases in the category 'any breastfeeding', in 2010 around 40% of newborn infants in Northwest China received substances other than breastmilk, with some 27.1% of newborn infants being given formula milk. The standard argument for the increased use of formula goes like this: with the increasing availability of infant formula, the increasing marketing of infant formula as more scientific and producing smarter babies, increasing incomes, and the increasing push for educated women to return to work and produce, infant formula gradually comes to replace breastfeeding in middle class homes. Then, poor women who may not work or may even be able to have their babies with them in their work, come to see formula feeding as more 'modern', and seek to emulate their wealthier countrywomen through feeding their children modern formula. To summarise, the argument is one of global homogenisation.

But what happens if we try to understand places such as Qinghai as having highly specific economic (and cultural) identities, rather than as nodes in a global capitalist system? In my research with Qinghai mothers I opened up the question of breastfeeding and formula feeding again through a lens of contingency and possibility. What I found was rather surprising. Mothers of all socioeconomic groups wanted to breastfeed rather than bottlefeed, many combining both successfully as required. But for those who did use formula exclusively, it was not in fact the global homogenisation argument that came through in these discussions. As I pored over my transcripts for clues, it emerged that formula feeding seemed to begin in conjunction with some highly specific interactions between biomedical traditions of the body and traditional Chinese medical traditions of the body. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) breastmilk is understood to be produced through the flow of blood and *qi* in the *Chong* and *Ren* meridians, two important meridians that pass through the uterus and breast. In biomedicine, breastmilk is understood to be produced through the combination of

hormones and the act of the baby sucking and stimulating let-down. These different understandings lead to different practices of breastfeeding. Although the two medical systems both support and encourage breastfeeding, when they interact and play out in the very bodies of women and infants, a series of openings occur where formula feeding might enter.

The first of these openings is immediately post-partum. In TCM understandings of breastfeeding, a mother needs to first recover from the act of giving birth, which included blood flow from her uterus and a draining of her *yang qi*. She cannot effectively make milk while in this state of *yin*. She is required to rest and eat *yang* foods to balance out her *qi* and blood. Feeding her baby while she is in an extreme *yin* state may even lead to imbalances in the baby's *qi*, and potentially, illness. Many of the mothers I interviewed waited twenty four hours before beginning breastfeeding, and in rural areas I heard of cases up to three days. This delay appears to have been in place for hundreds, if not thousands of years, and babies have still managed to begin breastfeeding eventually.

As mothers come to give birth in biomedical environments (hospitals), they begin to embody two different maternal bodies: that of TCM and that of biomedicine. So too, are their babies coming to embody two different lived realities. In current biomedical understandings of breastfeeding, babies should be put to the breast as soon as they are born, to *help* bleeding and the birthing of the placenta. From then on, frequent suckling assists with the production of milk, which first appears as colostrum then comes in fully between three and five days after the birth. If babies do not feed early enough, they become dehydrated and hypoglycaemic and may be treated with sugar water (to give them enough energy to suckle and feed). What happens when these two medical systems interact in one body? On the one hand, women are advised by family members to delay so that they may recover. But on the other hand, there is now a concern that babies may become dehydrated or hypoglycaemic. In many cases, the solution that keeps both tradition and hospital staff happy is the introduction of formula milk. While some successfully manage to transition the baby from formula to breastfeeding after the appropriate delay, the early introduction can play havoc with breastmilk supply and babies' sucking reflexes, thus increasing formula feeding.

In my research I identified three other specific openings where biomedicine and TCM interacted bizarrely to result in formula feeding, despite both medical systems upholding breastfeeding as the best way to feed a baby (Dombroski, 2013). I also identified times where breastfeeding was relatively simple and successful – the one month confinement seemed to be a time of breastfeeding ease, compared to studies showing the same time period to be a difficult one for mothers in Western nations (Day, 2004). So it is that in Qinghai, formula feeding is not necessarily just a result of economic change and multinational capitalism, but the result of a specific interaction in place and in particular bodies.

Unlike the 'lining up' of women into 'backward' and 'modern', my approach to researching women's everyday lives has been one assuming economic, social and bodily diversity in and between places. Although the use of formula in Qinghai might *look* like global homogenisation, it actually occurs in a highly contingent and overdetermined interaction in place. This multiplies our possibilities for action in a postdevelopment project for change. We need not rely only on standard breastfeeding education about the 'truth' of biomedical understandings of breastfeeding – a strategy which has continually failed in China where TCM is a highly theorised and state-supported medical system with

over 5000 years of history.<sup>iv</sup> Rather, a postdevelopment project of maternal and child health might target the specific moments in the breastfeeding journey where the engagement between biomedicine and TCM seems to produce less than healthy results (according to both medical systems). In fact, I have gone on to work with breastfeeding counsellors to produce dialogues and an educational video for biomedically trained personnel working with Chinese women in Australia – suggesting sensitive ways to avoid clash and promote infant health and breastfeeding at each of the specific times identified.<sup>v</sup>

### **Holding Out**

While disposable nappies have received millions of yuan of marketing attention in China, the average consumer uses only one per day. There are also millions of non-consumers, meaning that for most of China's babies, most of the time, alternative hygiene measures are being used. For many visitors to China, the sight of babies' bottoms poking from split crotch pants is a common but somewhat surprising sight. Some assume that babies clothed in this way must be allowed to urinate or defecate wherever they may be, and assume therefore it is a backward unhygienic practice related to poverty. My qualitative interviews with mothers and grandmothers in Xining however, seem to point in a different direction. Although it is true that wealthier people are more able to afford disposable nappies, it did not follow that they would use them exclusively. Poor and wealthy alike, in China, choose to continue using the ancient hygiene practice known colloquially as *ba niao* (which means literally, 'holding out to urinate'). Caregivers, including parents, grandparents, nannies and other relatives become attuned to babies' signals for impending need to urinate or defecate, and hold them out as required in appropriate places. Babies may indeed be permitted to urinate on the ground or floor on some occasions, but unspoken bodily rules and customs ensure hygiene through a system of separation (see Dombroski, [forthcoming](#) for a detailed explanation).

Is this system backward then? Will it change inevitably with modernisation? Perhaps not. People choose to use it for a variety of reasons. In Qinghai mothers told me that they continue to hold out (literally and metaphorically) mostly for reasons of health. These reasons are based in traditional understandings of the body and its humours, and are unlikely to be completely superseded by biomedicine. Just as the bodies imagined by TCM and biomedicine continued to coexist in one person for mothers and infants negotiating breastfeeding, babies' health depends on meeting the multiple health needs of these two imagined bodies. My participants understood babies' bottoms to be *tai nen*, 'extremely delicate', and hence the dampness associated with wearing disposable (or thick cloth) nappies was considered quite problematic. While they were aware of the need to keep hygiene through avoiding contact with germs and bacteria present in faeces, they were also concerned that the dampness caused by enclosed nappies (even clean ones) could migrate around the infant body causing other damp heat problems such as cradle cap, colic, eczema and night waking. It is therefore in the best interests of babies and their families that nappies are avoided as much as possible, while also ensuring that baby faeces was kept separate. They enabled this in part by introducing a very small amount of solid food very early in order to change the consistency of the infant's stools (from runny and frequent breast-fed stools to more solid and less frequent solid-food stools).

Researching infant toilet hygiene from a diversity perspective allows us to therefore multiply the possibilities for a postdevelopment project of hygiene and sanitation. The future of hygiene and

sanitation in Qinghai and elsewhere may not look like the norms of the so called developed nations such as Australia, where children often wear nappies until preschool (Christie 2010). What role might *baniao* play in postdevelopment projects of hygiene in simple circumstances, or in future resource-constrained scenarios? How can it also multiply possibilities for hygiene in the so-called developed world?

In conjunction with my research into *baniao* in Qinghai, I began researching with Australian and New Zealand mothers using a webgroup to explore *baniao* in their own contexts. This webgroup, called *Oznappyfree* operated as a sort of hybrid research collective (Latour, Roelvink, etc) researching and experimenting with variations of nappy-free babycare in a rather different socio-cultural environment. For these mothers, researching and enacting different types of infant hygiene was a project of maternal activism – working to protect the environment and their babies’ health, resist consumerism, and become more connected to their babies’ communications of discomfort and need. It may look like patriarchy or capitalism outsourcing social reproduction to mothers, but for many of them it was a project of ‘starting where they were’ to multiply possibilities for the future of their family, community and even planet. One mother has gone on to start a mother’s mentoring program that works to change the world through creating another community that works to celebrate and reinterpret feminine strengths:

Because the world needs more switched on mamas. Seriously sister, we can change the world. One birth, one child and one heart at a time. Let’s embrace it all with our hearts wide open! ([www.avalondarnesh.com](http://www.avalondarnesh.com)).

Sometimes as feminists we might feel quite uncomfortable with the open celebration of ‘feminine’ arts and strengths – it can come across as essentialist and problematically associating women with motherhood/the earth/nurture and so on, perhaps disempowering them in the long run as it contributes to structures of patriarchy and sexism. Such critiques have been levelled at the type of mothering many (but not all) of the *Oznappyfree* mothers practiced (see Bobel, 2001).<sup>vi</sup> But an approach built on WPP and Community Economies also rejects essentialism. The difference is that it starts with the lived realities of women’s lives, recognising that these realities are contingently overdetermined – influenced by structural forces like capitalism, neo-liberalism and patriarchy but also by other discourses, structures and beliefs. The future remains open to possibility, even more so if we do not draw back from exploring and amplifying the resistances, differences, diversity and community ethics that all contribute to (over)determining the future. Likewise in Qinghai, the point is to start with what women are already doing in their everyday lives, and multiply the possible futures beyond the teleology of progress from ‘backward’ to ‘modern’, or ‘developing’ to ‘developed’.

## From Post-Feminist to Postdevelopment

If our action research practice is concerned to actually build community economies in place, we are necessarily involved in a micro-politics of self-transformation, cultivating ourselves and others as subjects who can identify with and undertake community economic projects. In this connection the economic activities and subjectivities of women come to the fore as salient and exemplary on a number of grounds – not only because women as economic subjects are targeted by the

contemporary mainstream development agenda, but because they are actively engaged in the hidden and alternative economic activities of the diverse economy, because their traditional economic pursuits often acknowledge sociality and interdependency, and because women worldwide have become economic activists in place-based movements to defend or enhance livelihoods and environments (Gibson-Graham, PPP).

Postdevelopment thinkers and writers have critically evaluated the concept of development and found it wanting (McGregor 2009). Most of the time, the concept assumes one type of economy developing along similar lines to those of the industrialised nations of the world, a 'great singularity' effectively working to exclude other types of modernity (Escobar, 2004) and the multiplicity of necessary life-sustaining activities outside of earning higher incomes (Gibson-Graham 2005b). In a diverse economy, activities like breastfeeding and *baniao* are included as noncapitalist transactions and labour. These life sustaining economic activities have often been seen as the natural work of mothers, and have thus been 'hidden' from development thinkers and workers examining the economy. However, Gibson-Graham have highlighted the importance of women's economic activities, subjectivities, socialities and interdependencies as part of a diverse economy. As we see and map the diversity of the economies around us, we are better positioned to multiply possibilities for building ethical community economies on and around some of these traditionally excluded activities.

Transforming our subjectivities and cultivating ourselves and others to identify these economic activities as possibilities for futures yet unimagined is therefore an important task – not only for our research participants but also for ourselves. In this piece I have shown how my own subjectivity as a woman and mother pushed me along the journey from 'post-feminist' to third wave feminist, where issues of representation, subjectivity and difference are to be explored and even enhanced rather than denied. I have explored how my understanding of gender and development was transformed through encounter with the work of JK Gibson-Graham and others in Women and the Politics of Place project and the Community Economies Collective, and given a brief taste of how this has played out in seeing diversity and multiplying possibility with my research with mothers in both 'developing' and 'developed' contexts. I continue to draw inspiration from the action research outlined by Gibson-Graham, and look for opportunities to continue the next stage of my journey in more practical and less theoretical arenas.

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<sup>i</sup> A translation of the Chinese term *suzhi*. Different people are ranked according to their 'quality', which includes education, background, and so on. The term has been studied and critiqued by Jacka (2009).

<sup>ii</sup> In Chinese Studies circles, I am often questioned why I am researching mothers because 'grandmothers always look after the children in China', as if the only interesting thing about mothers is childcare, and as if grandmothers are not also mothers.

<sup>iii</sup> I removed the words backward and modern from the text before doing the wordle.

<sup>iv</sup> Guldán's attempts at changing weaning behaviour shows a classic clash between TCM and biomedicine, where recommendations from biomedical nutritionists completely ignore TCM food categorisations. She still labels it as a 'transition' to an inevitable future of biomedical dominance, however. See Guldán (2000).

<sup>v</sup> Of course, I am applying my research with mothers in Qinghai to Chinese mothers in Australia, which is not ideal, but an example of 'start where you are!' transformation. As time and funding permits, I hope to repeat a similar project with Chinese mothers in Australia and New Zealand, and to likewise develop similar Mandarin dialogues in partnership with biomedical staff in Qinghai.

<sup>vi</sup> Ironically, the women sometimes draw inspiration from the baby-centred care that babies in 'traditional cultures' experience in order to help themselves feel better about the intensiveness of their mothering practices. Yet in Qinghai, neither breastfeeding nor *baniao* are necessarily considered labour intensive due to shared caregiving arrangements – many of my Qinghai interviewees were responsible for breastfeeding their babies but everything else was shared by all family members, including *baniao* and earning and income. Some babies even slept in the same bed as their grandparents.